



STANFORD UNIVERSITY MEDICAL CENTER

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STANFORD UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF MEDICINE
Department of Genetics

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Dear Bruce,

This is in response to your circular letter of November 30, 1971. I have been pondering for some time how best to respond to it.

I agree with you that the nature of the responsibility of Academy members for the work "done its name" by the NRC is clouded and confusing. But I believe that there are more workable remedies than the one that you advocate. In particular we should destroy the fiction that the Academy is capable of producing final judgements even on scientific, not to mention policy-oriented issues. And I would resist the inclusion of moral factors, as you propose, if it would lead to the implication that a project that had passed muster was ipso facto declared to be "moral". All down the line we have a variety of questions on which there can be a multitude of individual judgements, and yet somehow some process needs to be evolved by which corporate recommendations can be crystallized.

The first step towards a remedy is to clearly disassociate the membership of the Academy from any responsibility whatsoever for the reports of the NRC and of Academy committees on which a member has not himself sat. I would also encourage a kind of parliamentary responsibility with perhaps more frequent accountability than there has been in the past to allow consensual judgements to be registered about the overall integrity of the system of analysis and reporting. But finally I think we should institutionalize a system which allows for the registration of dissent and other commentary by any member of the Academy on any subject that one of its committees reports on. The steps that Phil Handler has taken to facilitate the earlier and wider distribution of reports to Academy members, are a step in the right direction but in my judgement need to be strengthened considerably, for example, along the lines of Part 1 of your resolution. But then I would add to it the provision that the Academy will maintain a public archives of further comments made by individual members on each of the reports and that it will furnish copies of these responsa or at least a notice of their availability to every inquirer about those findings. Whenever possible preliminary copies of reports should be available to Academy members prior to their general release to facilitate the entering of such commentaries.

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LT. J. P. KENNEDY, JR. LABORATORIES FOR MOLECULAR MEDICINE, DEDICATED TO RESEARCH IN MENTAL RETARDATION

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Such a process will help make it clear that the Academy is functioning not as a tribunal but as a communication channel and one which can give as much weight to the pluralistic judgements of Academy members as a whole as it does to a particular committee chosen to review a specific task. Obviously, one of my hopes is that such a system will help "keep each committee honest" in an anticipatory fashion given the knowledge that such critiques will in fact be included.

Other steps are also being proposed that will alleviate Academy members from the unfair onus of responsibility for matters that they do not control, for example the proposed restructuring to include participation of the Institute of Medicine and the National Academy of Engineering as co-sponsors of the National Research Council.

I really do not see any way in which an honorary body like the Academy can really take direct corporate responsibility for the kinds of reports that issue from the NRC. However, I do think that the mechanism I have proposed can elicit responsible and reputable criticism from a group of scientists whose qualifications will be bolstered by their well earned recognition and election to Academy membership. I have not been one of the great enthusiasts for the NAS in the past - you will not, for example, have seen me at any of the annual meetings. However, I do believe that the membership has been selected, to-date, on objective criteria of scientific capability, and I believe that there is more to be lost than gained by the resignation of people like yourself. I certainly do understand the grievances that lead you to contemplate resigning, but I hope that you will reconsider in favor of exerting a constructive influence that reflects the realities of what Academy membership can accomplish and can be responsible for.

I have vented my critical feelings directly to Phil Handler well enough in the past that nothing in this letter will be any news to him, but there still may remain some merit in my sending him a copy, too.

To turn to one of the question of substance in your proposals, if we assume that the membership will be kept more effectively informed about the progress of committee actions than has been true in the past, do we need much more by way of formal mechanisms? Certainly in the course of any committee's work you ought to be entirely free to express your opinions to the chairman of that committee, and if you feel that you have been inadequately informed or if you have opinions contrary to the committee's judgement, you scarcely require formal approval by the Academy to have the right and privilege of expressing your personal opinions thereon. I would suggest that as a matter of professional courtesy that you give the committee the opportunity to hear your views for quiet deliberation before they enter the public arena, and even that restraint may be more or less appropriate in different circumstances. I think I would have to resign from the Academy very promptly, as a matter of pinciple, if a system were established that indeed enforced a personal responsibility for committee actions that I was in no position to implement. Therefore, my own remedies go rather in the direction of loosening

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my ties and attempting to shape the process of committee action in a direction closer to that of scientific publication and debate generally.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Genetics

cc: Dr. Philip Handler